

# Thoughts On The Shroud Of Turin

## 1. Introduction

A well known and enigmatic religious relic is the Shroud of Turin. Believed to be an image of Christ as he was in the tomb at the time of his resurrection, the Shroud has been scrutinized, studied and debated as to its authenticity and meaning for Christians around the world. Is the Shroud an image of Christ or a clever hoax? I believe there's an answer to this question based on precedents in the scriptures and a key description in the Gospel accounts.

## 2. Faith and the physical

A statement I've heard over the years in regard to relics such as the Shroud of Turin, Ark of the Covenant and Noah's ark is "if you have faith you don't need the object, and, if you have the object you don't have faith". That makes a lot of sense if we understand it in context. Some might think this idea demands that we accept what the Bible has to say without question, and, without proof. On the other hand some think that once an object such as Noah's ark or the Ark of the Covenant is found people will embrace the Bible and develop real faith. Neither of these ideas are accurate.

First of all, Bible believers should never accept something without adequate proof or evidence to support what the scriptures state. As a matter of fact, a study of biblical evidences provides ample verification of historical places and events recorded in the scriptures that were once thought to be inaccurate or mythical. Internally the Bible has a consistency and cohesiveness that extends through every part of the narrative. That alone is testimony of a singular influence delivering revelations recorded by over forty writers covering a span of more than a thousand years. Within that narrative are precedents that establish a principle regarding physical relics, and, I believe, will clarify the nature and importance of things such as the Shroud of Turin. We have examples of these precedents in the writing of Moses.

## 3. Objects of worship

The most incredible display of God's power in the world had to be the events that took place during the time of Moses. The plagues brought on Egypt to gain the Hebrews release, His appearance at Sinai, and miracles in the wilderness during the forty year wandering. The offspring of Abraham were witnesses of these spectacles, and so, it stands to reason that they would later immortalize what they had experienced in various forms of artwork as most cultures of the time did. But they didn't! And there's a reason why.

Moses farewell address in the book of Deuteronomy includes specific statements regarding physical representations of God or his work. He encouraged the people to remember what they had experienced. "***Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of***

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*thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons; Specially the day that thou stoodest before the LORD thy God in Horeb...*” (Deut 4.9-10). Moses continues and clarifies what they are not to do by way of remembrance. “*Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure...*” (Deut 4.15-16). The list continues as Moses speaks to the people, and the Ten Commandments themselves condemn making graven images that could become objects of worship. That not only included copying idols of pagan nations but also extended to objects not authorized by God.

There was to be no physical representation of God which could be turned into an object of worship. We see how this became a problem during the reign of king Hezekiah involving an item that was commanded by God during the wilderness wandering; the brazen serpent. Speaking of the reign of Hezekiah we learn that “*He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.*” (2 Kng 18.4).

As humans we ascribe value and sometimes attributes to objects because they represent something to us. Reading about the life of Noah it would be amazing to find the ark. It would be incredible to truly locate the Ark of the Covenant, Christ’s cross, the cup Jesus drank from at the last supper and so forth. But what would happen if we did? Some would use the objects to reduce the story of the Bible to a simple history that was well preserved. Others might be drawn to the objects and feel a closeness to their faith through them. Another group might begin to worship the objects and a few might attempt to exploit them for gain. None of these reactions would do anything the biblical narrative doesn’t already provide.

Objects in a sense are a proxy. A stand in for the real thing. Over time the stand-in becomes the absolute focus of attention and faith. The children of Israel made that mistake regarding the ark of the covenant. After losing to the Philistines after God withdrew His support, they thought if they had the Ark of the Covenant with them it’s power would defeat their enemies. They had a very rude awakening and learned just how wrong they were. The Israelites brought the ark to go before them in battle thinking that it had power to do protect them. They reasoned, “*Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.*” (1 Sam 4.3). Their flawed thinking resulted in a full retreat, the death of thirty thousand men and the capture of the Ark by the Philistines (1 Sam 4.10-18).

There are objects that were commanded by God. They were made of fine materials and skillfully decorated. But, they weren’t the objects of worship, they were objects used in worship. The focus remained on God at all times and there was no power in any of those articles. The

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power was God who worked with and through these holy creations. Today there are many who think religious objects and relics have power in themselves, just as the children of Israel did with the Ark of the Covenant. As the Israelites found out, that thinking is incorrect.

The bottom line is that there was never a command or example to craft something representing the being or power of God. This was forbidden and condemned. The reason being that God is greater than anything in creation and therefore cannot be reduced to representation by physical components. God is to be seen through his word and the evidence in creation that exists around us. Paul confirms this as he writes, “*For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead...*” (**Rom 1.20**). The magnificence of the universe and the absence of directives to create physical images to represent God is significant. This precedent tells us that God has never commanded any object to be made to represent him nor has he preserved things such as Noah’s ark or the Ark of the Covenant knowing that our attention would be focused on the earthly material object and not the spiritual reality of the creator. Objects that were in the Tabernacle, Noah’s ark and other things have been lost in time. We have the word, and the word is sufficient. So, what about the Shroud?

### 4. The Shroud, science and mystery

The Shroud surfaced in Europe around 1350. Over the years it’s been guarded, protected from examination and rarely viewed until recently. Carbon dating attempts have been contradictory. Samples of material from the Shroud have been tested for nuclear and mitochondrial DNA. Fibers of the Shroud have been tested and believed to be authentic dating to the first century A.D. The image of the body in the Shroud bears attributes and characteristics of a man who has been tortured and executed by means of crucifixion.

In the late 1990's radiocarbon dating determined the Shroud was indeed from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a time historically notorious for holy relics being manufactured. The appearance of the Shroud, even at that time, was regarded as a clever fake and dismissed. Over the years interest in the Shroud has grown and been promoted by some while others remain skeptical about it. The complexity of the image on the Shroud and how it got there are unknown which seems to verify that something miraculous took place.

The fact we don’t know how the image on the Shroud was created isn’t proof or evidence of it’s authenticity. We don’t know how the Egyptians built the pyramids. We don’t know how Stonehenge was constructed and there are other marvels around the world that defy explanation. Not knowing how something was done, to me, doesn’t provide evidence of divine activity. It simply indicates that someone had more skill and ability in areas we don’t know about. One example of that is the massive rock garden in Homestead, Florida, which, the builder claims, was constructed using the secrets of the ancient Egyptians. One feature of the site is a nine ton gate that can be opened with one finger! In the modern world it’s quite possible that many methods

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and techniques developed and used in trades or by individuals in antiquity have been lost. The absence of explanation, especially in cases such as the Shroud of Turin, doesn't prove the divine or miraculous. Taking a look at the scriptural narrative however there are key points that challenge the idea that the Shroud is an image of Christ.

### 5. The scriptural record

The biblical record of the burial of Jesus following the crucifixion and one detail in particular generates questions about the Shroud's authenticity. Note the following points.

Jesus died late in the afternoon on Friday. The Sabbath was approaching and it was the time of Passover so speed was necessary. Sunset was imminent so there wasn't much time to prepare a body. Permission to take the body had to be secured first and that took time. By the time Joseph, Nicodemus and those with them were able to get Jesus body and transport it to the tomb, which probably wasn't far from Golgotha, there wouldn't have been time to do a traditional preparation.

The Shroud of Turin is a single piece of cloth that appears to create a mirror image of the front and back of the body represented. The Gospel accounts appear to give a different description of the immediate treatment of the body. Luke records that Joseph of Arimathaea ***“begged the body of Jesus. And he took it down, and wrapped it in linen” (Lk 23.52-53)***. Matthew writes, ***“when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth” (Matt 27.59)***. John gives more detail about the burial process writing, ***“And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes” (John 19.39-40)***. Mark describes the burial and Joseph's action stating he, ***“bought fine linen, and took him down, and wrapped him in the linen” (Mk 15.46)***.

The Shroud of Turin appears to a rectangular cloth upon which the body was placed then folded over the front of the body thus capturing images of the front and back aspects. The scriptural descriptions seem to differ slightly. From Matthew and Luke's account fine linen was the cloth that was used to cover Jesus body. No specific method of doing this is provided, but John states the cloth was ***“wound”*** around the body which makes sense. Mark's account seems to agree with this as he states Jesus was ***“wrapped”*** in the linen.

The burial process had to be rapid. Linen cloth was secured to wrap the body. Whether this was done at the crucifixion site, or the tomb, isn't specified but the impression seems to be a lateral wrap or winding around Jesus body. The idea that a cloth was laid out in the tomb, the body laid on it and then the cloth pulled down to cover the entire body doesn't seem to fit what the scriptures have to say. And there's an additional detail that may eliminate the Shroud of Turin as authentic.

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More specific detail of how the body had been prepared with the linen cloth doesn't emerge until the first day of the week when Peter and John run to the tomb having heard of the resurrection. John writes, "*And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself.*" (John 20.5-7). Take note of this passage. There are significant details that I believe disqualifies the Shroud of Turin as Jesus burial cover.

First, John indicates that the cloth wrapping Jesus body was not a single piece. He refers to the "*linen clothes*". Apparently this wasn't a single wrap but was made up of two or more pieces of cloth. A compelling detail is noted by John, the disciple who entered the tomb first, who saw the cloths that had covered the body but he also saw "*the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself*".

If we take these descriptions of how the body was prepared we find that late in the day, with sunset approaching, Joseph, Nicodemus and those helping them were given Jesus body. They quickly wrapped it in linen cloth purchased for the occasion, winding it around the body laterally. The body is then placed in the tomb and the final cloth, described as a "*napkin*" (KJV) or handkerchief (NKJV), or face cloth (ASB / ESV) is then placed over his face. With this description we have Jesus body wound in multiple cloths of linen with a separate cloth laid over his face. If you had a short time to prepare a body this would fit those conditions. A quick wrapping of the body, cover the face and apply some spices with the intent to come back after the Sabbath to finish the job.

### 6. Conclusions

The Shroud of Turin is a masterful accomplishment of preserving an accurate depiction of a crucifixion victim in cloth. The methods of achieving this, while being unknown to us, are obviously complex and lost to time. Could the Shroud be the actual burial cloth of someone who was crucified? That's possible, but based on the descriptions in the Gospel accounts, it's not Jesus.

No other physical object has been preserved by God in order for us to verify the written accounts found in the scriptures. The Bible can be validated by both internal and external evidences and has stood the test of time. It's consistency from beginning to end, shared symbolism and overall continuity of the message, speaks to a common source that revealed, inspired and preserves the message. We don't need Noah's ark to believe in a worldwide flood. The Ark of the Covenant isn't necessary for us to accept the divine origin of the Law of Moses and we don't need the Shroud of Turin to verify the resurrection of Christ. If the Shroud was authentic it would stand out as the only object of it's kind preserved by God and would violate the precedents the Lord reveals in the scriptures. Jesus was crucified, buried and rose on the third day - the first day of the week. The event is recorded and verified in scripture and as such, the

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textual record is the evidence and proof.